



The professional careers of former Portuguese football players: a sociodemographic and professional approach

Las carreras profesionales de los exfutbolistas portugueses: un enfoque sociodemográfico y profesional

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Abstract

Introduction: The study is aimed to identify sociodemographic and professional characteristics related to the careers of former Portuguese football players.

Methodology: The sample consisted of 84 Portuguese former players (48.8 ± 8.2 years old) with at least 8 years of professional experience, who finished their careers between 1988 and 2018. Quantitative data was collected from a validated semi-structure interview guide.

Results and Discussion: Former Portuguese players had a career of 15.2 ± 3.1 years with more 6.4 ± 2.2 years of youth federated formation. Significant statistical differences were seen between former players with different competitive levels ($t(71)=3.843$; $p=0.001$) and international status ($t(82)=-2.740$; $p=0.008$). During their careers, 36% accomplish academic formation and 61.9% pursued technical education. Academic habilitation was statistically significant relationships with competitive level ($\chi^2(1)=9.655$; $p=0.002$) and international status ($\chi^2(1)=6.930$; $p=0.008$), unlike what happened with technical qualification ($p>0.05$). The majority of former players marry (83.3%) and have children during the career (82.2%). The divorce rate is 15%. Residential mobility is high (8.1 ± 5.55 years). The professional incomes were considered high or very high and 16.7% of former players developed addictions during their career.

Conclusion: Former players with higher competitive levels and international status tend to have longer careers. Conversely, they tend to invest less in academic formation. The results reveals that the football career is brief and presents stress and risk factors, mainly at higher competitive levels. The findings contribute to a better understanding and discussion of the professional careers of former Portuguese football players.

Keywords

Football; former players; post-career; sociodemographic approach.

Resumen

Introducción: El estudio tiene como objetivo identificar las características sociodemográficas y profesionales relacionadas con las carreras de los exfutbolistas portugueses.

Metodología: 84 exjugadores portugueses (48.8 ± 8.2 años) con al menos 8 años de experiencia profesional, que finalizaron sus carreras entre 1988 y 2018. Los datos cuantitativos se recopilaron a partir de una guía de entrevista semiestructurada validada.

Resultados y Discusión: Los exjugadores portugueses tuvieron una carrera de 15.2 ± 3.1 años con más 6.4 ± 2.2 años de formación federada juvenil. Se observaron diferencias estadísticas significativas entre los exjugadores con diferentes niveles competitivos ($t(71)=3.843$; $p=0.001$) y estatus internacional ($t(82)=-2.740$; $p=0.008$). Durante sus carreras, el 36% completó formación académica y el 61.9% siguió educación técnica. La habilitación académica mostró relaciones estadísticamente significativas con el nivel competitivo ($\chi^2(1)=9.655$; $p=0.002$) y el estatus internacional ($\chi^2(1)=6.930$; $p=0.008$), a diferencia de lo que ocurrió con la calificación técnica ($p>0.05$). La mayoría de los exjugadores se casan (83.3%) y tienen hijos durante la carrera (82.2%). La tasa de divorcio es del 15%. La movilidad residencial es alta (8.1 ± 5.55 años). Los ingresos profesionales se consideraron altos o muy altos y el 16.7% de los exjugadores desarrollaron adicciones durante su carrera.

Conclusión: Los exjugadores con niveles competitivos más altos y estatus internacional tienden a tener carreras más largas. Por el contrario, tienden a invertir menos en formación académica. La carrera futbolística es breve y presenta factores de estrés y riesgo, principalmente en los niveles competitivos más altos. Los hallazgos contribuyen a una mejor comprensión y discusión de las carreras profesionales de los exfutbolistas portugueses.

Palabras clave

Fútbol; exjugadores; post-carrera; enfoque sociodemográfico.

Introduction

Numerous research studies have explored professional sports careers and career transitions (Côté et al., 2017; Roderick, 2006; Ryba et al., 2016; Stambulova et al., 2021), with the aim of understanding the impacts they have on the lives of athletes. A professional sports career includes a beginning, development, and an end that typically occurs early in life (Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999; Samela, 1994; Stambulova et al., 2009; Wylleman et al., 2004). Over the years, the concept of career has been examined from multiple theoretical perspectives, generally referring to an organized sequence of upward movements or transitions within an occupational system (Roderick, 2006). This perspective encompasses learning processes, application sequences, employee perceptions of task progressivity, and conceptual changes related to both work and personal development (Chapoulie, 1987; Stambulova et al., 2009; World Players Association, 2017).

Athletes' careers often involve frequent and varied transitions throughout their lives, with major changes typically viewed as stressors that pressure individuals to adapt (Lavalée, 2005; Wheaton, 1990). These experiences are linked to difficulties in adapting to similar changes (Carapinheira et al., 2019; Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011; Stambulova et al., 2021). Career transitions are pivotal in athletes' life journeys (Murphy, 1995; Stambulova et al., 2021; Stambulova & Samuel, 2019). Successfully navigating these moments, both within and outside the sport environment, enhances opportunities for a long and successful sports career and demonstrates life adjustment skills post-career. Conversely, difficulties in managing transitions can lead to negative outcomes such as premature career termination, psychological issues, or dependence on external resources (Stambulova et al., 2009).

To this study considered the Holistic Athlete Career Model (Wylleman, 2019), specifically the level of athletic mastery, to examine the adaptive, emotional, and cognitive dimensions intrinsic to the sports careers of football players (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Holistic Athlete Career Model (Wylleman, 2019)

AGE	10	15	20	25	30	35
Athletic level	Initiation	Development	Mastery		Discontinuation	
Psychological level	Childhood	Puberty Adolescence	Young adulthood		Adulthood	
Psychosocial level	Parents Siblings Peers	Peers Coach Parents	Partner Coach Support staff Teammates Students		Family (Coach) Peers	
Academic/ Vocational level	Primary education	Secondary education	(Semi-) professional athlete		Post-athletic career	
			Higher education	(Semi-) professional athlete		
Financial level	Family	Family Sport governing body	Sport governing body Government/NOC Sponsor		Family	Employer

Understanding and reflecting on the complexity inherent to these transition processes of former professional players can be useful for developing strategies and intervention programs that maximize the quality of life of this population.

The sports career in professional Football

A career as a professional footballer is highly coveted, requiring high motivation and perseverance (Monteiro et al., 2020, 2023; Roderick, 2012). There are an estimated 20,000 professional soccer players worldwide (Junge & Dvořák, 2015). Since the advent of professionalism in the nineteenth century, players have achieved social prominence, often becoming global, national, regional, or local heroes due to their exceptional skills and abilities (Brandão et al., 2000; Roderick, 2012). Professional football

career is often seen as an extraordinary occupation, sometimes referred to as "love work" by fans, which sets it apart from the highly skilled manual labor typical of the industrial worker class (Gearing, 1999; Roderick, 2006). Football players have uniquely short, intense, and well-defined careers compared to non-athletes, a characteristic that can make them particularly vulnerable to the effects of aging on their careers (Selingardi, 2013). This vulnerability includes job insecurity, uncertainty about contract renewals or new opportunities, and the constant need to publicly demonstrate their technical and competitive skills (Grove & Stoll, 1999; Roderick, 2006; World Players Association, 2017). Research in professional sports should concentrate on the sociological and psychological development of players, analyzing all transitional stages and the social constructs that influence their careers.

Sociodemographic and professional indicators of football careers

Understanding the sociodemographic and professional aspects of football players can assist in accurately depicting their reality and effectively addressing career-related variables (Arlani et al., 2016; Barth et al., 2022; Turner et al., 2000; Ureña-Lopera et al., 2020). This requires a comprehensive categorization of former players across various domains. Footballers belong to a cohort of athletes known for their extended careers (Lemez & Baker, 2015). On average, a professional football player's tenure spans between 15 and 17 years (Baron et al., 2012; Teques & Rosa, 2019). Chronologically, most players retire between the ages of 31 and 35 (Agresta et al., 2008; Drawer & Fuller, 2002; Gouttebarga et al., 2016; Rintaugu, 2011; Ureña-Lopera et al., 2020). In a specific study of Portuguese Football players, the average retirement age was notably higher, ranging between 36 and 40 years (Carapinha, Torregrossa, et al., 2018). Conversely, it was verified that older players tend to have longer professional careers compared to newer generations (Carapinha et al., 2018). A recent UK-based study reported that the average age at retirement for professional footballers is 15.3 ± 5.2 years, underscoring the need for further scientific inquiry (Sanders & Stevinson, 2017).

Achieving the status of a professional footballer presents a significant challenge. According to data from the Portuguese Professional Football League, only 16% of players reach the first league, where they stay for an average of 4.7 years. Only a slight 2% advancement to the national senior team (Lima da Costa, 2017). First-league players earn an average monthly salary of 6500 euros, excluding those from the top three national clubs (Drawer & Fuller, 2002). Internationally, over half of professional players (45%) earn less than \$1,000 per month, with 41% experiencing salary delays during their careers (FIFPro, 2016). The average contract duration is two years, and 29% of players experience involuntary transfers (Rice et al., 2016). Concerns about one's abilities, perceived threats, and constant competitive pressures can lead to stress and negatively affect football players' performance (Barth & Emrich, 2021; Grove & Stoll, 1999; Roderick, 2012).

Despite limited research, football players are susceptible to different mental health difficulties associated with both sports-related causes (e.g., injuries, overtraining, stress) and non-sports-related factors (Barth et al., 2022; Kegelaers et al., 2018; Rice et al., 2016; Teques & Rosa, 2019). Psychological challenges are particularly prevalent during periods of intense competition (Rice et al., 2016). Family support has played a crucial role in career stability (Grove & Stoll, 1999; Roderick, 2012), especially the support and inclusion of family members (spouse, children, divorce). However, issues related to addictive substances and dependencies also warrant consideration (Kegelaers et al., 2018).

In summary, comprehensive studies on the careers of football players reveal that the process of professionalization, while relatively short-lived, exerts a profound influence on their lives from both sociological and psychological perspectives. The scarcity of data concerning the profiles of retired football players highlights the necessity for contextual studies based on a comprehensive athletic model to clarify inherent professional traits and related variables, as proposed by the theoretical model (Wylleman, 2019).

Problem and objectives

This research aims to outline the paths of former Portuguese footballers through a sociodemographic and professional perspective, focusing on aspects such as career preparation, career duration, academic and technical formation during the career, family milestones, and general professional indicators during their careers. Furthermore, this study seeks to compare the career preparation and career duration of former players between career end period (1988-2005 and 2006-2018), competitive level (1st and 2nd divisions), and international status (international or non-international). Simultaneously, intend to



analyze statistically significant relationships between academic and technical formation during the career with career end period, competitive level and international status.

The selection of variables was based on theoretical indicators that seem to have the most impact on the professional career of football players.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised of 84 former portuguese football players (48.85 ± 8.21 years). Due to the challenges in reaching individuals from the target population, a convenience sampling method was employed, factoring in the availability of participants and the diverse residential locations of former players (table 1).

Table 1. Current residences of former players included in the sample

Regions (Nuts II)	N	Percentage
North	15	17.9
Center	25	29.8
Lisbon and Tagus Valley	27	32.1
Alentejo	6	7.1
Algarve	3	3.6
Madeira Island and Azores*	6	7.1
Out from Portugal**	2	2.4
Total	84	100.0

* Includes former players from the autonomous regions of Madeira Island and the Azores.

**Former players who live beyond the national territory.

Inclusion criteria were former players with at least 8 years of professional experience and a transition to the post-career between 1988 and 2018. To be included in the study, former players had to have at least 3 complete years of retirement, as suggested in the literature (Carapinheira et al., 2019).

The participants were informed of the confidentiality and anonymity of the data obtained, and the study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Beira Interior (UBI) in accordance with the guidelines outlined in the Helsinki Declaration.

Procedure

The study's dependent variables included career preparation, career duration and academic and technical formation during the career. Concomitantly, family milestone and general professional indicators during the career were considered to obtain information characterizing the personal and family lives of former players. Below are the definitions for each item:

- The career preparation was characterized by information on the number of years of federated formation completed by former players in football youth, the age of professionalization in the context of senior team, and the identification of a key formation factor for professionalization (technical-tactical factor, physical-physiological factor, psychological factor, or without distinction factor).
- The career duration was defined as the interval between the initial year of professional engagement in a senior team and the year of career cessation.
- Academic and technical formation during the career was evaluated based on the completion of academic and/or technical formation (dual career). Academic formation is divided into four levels: no formation, former players with education of third cycle (or below), high school education and university education. The technical formation was divided into five levels: no technical formation, football coaching course grade I (UEFA C), grade II (UEFA B), grade III (UEFA A) and grade IV (UEFA Pro). Other technical areas were not considered because only 2 former players mentioned that did formation out of sport area.
- Family milestone and general professional indicators were employed to delineate the familial characteristics of former players, specifically the evolution of marital status (married, in a civil union or single), age at marriage, number of children, occurrence of divorce, period of time outside of the official



residence (during relocation), and nature of familial support (total, partial, or none). General professional indicators encompass information regarding a former player's career, specifically the number of clubs represented, perceptions of income levels (very high, high, medium, or low), engagement in other professional activities, and the identification of potential addictive, dependent, or negative behaviours.

All the elements discussed in various studies were taken into account, as they might influence the emotional stability of the athlete, their family, and subsequently have repercussions that extend into the future.

The study used an validated interview guide to study the impact of careers on the quality of life of former portuguese football players (Teixeira et al., 2024). Quantitative data was collected from responses to questions in areas 1 and 2 of the interview guide (table 2) to achieve the study's objectives.

Table 2. Areas and categories used in the interview guide for data collection

Area 1: Biographical Data		Area 2: Professional Career
Category 1: Personal Data	Category 2: Professional Data	Category 3: Sociodemographic Background
Full name / Sport name	Year of beginning and end of career	Conciliation of professional activity
Place of birth / Date of birth	Internationalisations	Years of living outside the usual residence
Academic and technical qualifications	Tactical Position	Family
Residency (pre-career and post-career)	Start of federated practice (formation)	Academic and technical habilitations
Height and Weight (current)	Characteristics of professionalisation	General socio-economic level
	Curriculum vitae summary	

Then, we identify and define each of the independent variables included for the study.

- Career end period was determined to be 30 years (1988-2018). There were two groups formed in order to compare two generations of former players, one for the older players, who finished their careers between 1988 and 2005, and one for the younger players, who completed their careers between 2006 and 2018. The cut value was based on the average number of years of professional abandonment among the 84 individuals surveyed.

- Competitive level was determined by the divisions in which former professional athletes worked during their careers. Two levels were considered: the 1st division – which includes former players who played more than 50% of career years in the country's main league, and the 2nd division – which includes players who played more than 50% of careers years in the country's secondary leagues.

- The international status was defined by the number of internationalizations accomplished by former players in the Portuguese "AA" team (Portuguese Football Federation). Two groups were identified: non-international (with no internationalizations) and international players (with one or more internationalizations).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted through online meetings (ZOOM) between the researcher (first author) and the interviewee (former player), lasting between 55 and 80 minutes. Participants' consent was obtained to record audio and/or video recordings, which were then transcribing on a standardized format. A protocol was developed to ensure maximum rigor in data collection, from initial contact with former players to post-interview procedures. The plan included 14 criteria. Specifically, contact selection (i), contact implementation (ii), interview schedule (iii), interview preparation (iv), interview objective explanation (v), interview dynamics explanation (vi), clarification on treatment and dissemination of results (vii), authorization for interview recording (viii), exposure curriculum vitae of the former player's resume for confirmation or correction of information (ix), reading and signing informed consent (x), the formal implementation of the interview according to the guidelines in the script (xi), interruption of recording at the end of the interview (xii), moment for the interviewee to add information they found relevant (xiii) and, finally, address personal thanks and greetings (IX).

A quantitative database was constructed for each response, encompassing precise information for each variable.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS software v.29. Initially, the variables under study were described using relative frequencies, mean, standard deviations, minimum, and maximum values (Ho, 2014).

To address the operationalized hypotheses, the independent samples t-test and Pearson's Chi-Square correlation were used, as suggested by Ho (Ho, 2014).

Relating to Independent sample T-Test the assumptions of normality of the data and the homogeneity of variances were checked. The normality of the data was verified using the Shapiro-Wilk test (<50) and Kolmogorov-Smirnov ($n>50$). The homogeneity of variances was checked with Levene's test. In all comparisons these assumptions were met. To calculate the effect size, we consider the Cohen's d values ($d \geq 2$ = small size; $d \geq 0.5$ = medium size; $d \geq 0.8$ = large size).

As all Chi-Square tables were 2x2 the assumption of no expected frequencies under 5 were checked and met in all cases. Standardized adjusted residuals higher than 2 were considered for checking significant correlations. For these tests, a p -value of <0.05 was assumed to reject the null hypothesis (Ho, 2014).

Results

The results are presented in four subsections: career preparation (i), career duration (ii), academic and technical formation during the career (iii) and family milestones and general professional indicators during the career (iv).

Career preparation

Participants in the study engaged in federated formation for approximately 6 years prior to commencing their professional careers (table 3). A professional career in a senior team typically begins around the age of 18, coinciding with the Under-19 youth team age range. 26.2% of players were internationalized by Portuguese youth teams, with an average of 9.1 ± 17.8 internationalizations per player.

Table 3. Data of the years of youth federated formation and the age of professionalization of former players.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Years of youth federated formation	84	2	13	6.4	2.2
Age of professionalization	84	15	25	18.3	1.4

Data from the sample show that former players in the first division had less years of federated participation in youth with compared to those in the second division (table 4).

Table 4. Years of youth federated formation according to competitive level

	Competitive Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Years of federated formation	1st division	43	5.5	1.9
	2nd division	41	7.3	2.1

Comparison between these groups show significative differences between them ($t(81)=-4.071$; $p<0.001$). This confirms that higher-level competitive players completed, in average, less 1.8 years (IC95% -0.9; -2.7 years) of federated formation than lower-level players. Effect size was considered large Cohen's $d = 0.889$ (IC95% -1.335; -0.437 years).

When inquired about the most important characteristics for professionalization, former players cited psychological factors (e.g., volitivity, resilience, and a willingness to sacrifice) and technical factors (e.g., understanding of the game and technical resources) as the most significant (table 5).

Table 5. Relevant training factors to reach a professional career

	N	Percentage
No differentiation	8	9.5
Technical-Tactical Factors	33	39.3



Physical/Physiological Factors	9	10.7
Psychological Factors	34	40.5
Total	84	100.0

Surprisingly, only 9 former players highlighted the significance of physical and physiological factors, such as force, resistance, speed, and coordination capacities. In contrast, 8 players did not differentiate among these factors, viewing all four as collectively essential for success in professional football.

Career duration

The average career duration for former Portuguese players was 15.2 ± 3.15 years. The shortest verified career was 8 years, while the longest was 22 years. Former players who retired between 1988 and 2005 had a shorter average career duration compared to those who retired between 2006 and 2018 (table 6).

Table 6. Career duration according to career end period

	Career End Period	N	Mean	Standard deviation
Career duration	1988-2005	33	14.7	2.7
	2006-2018	51	15.6	3.3

Comparison between these groups show non-significative differences between them ($t(82)=-1.255$; $p=0.213$). Effect size was also considered small Cohen's $d = -0.280$ (IC95% -0.720; 0.160 years). This confirms that the 0.88 mean years (around 10.6 months) of difference found in career duration have no meaning as a trend (IC95% -2.3; 0.5 years).

The analysis of career duration in function of competitive level shows that former players who mostly played in the first division had longer careers than those who played in the second divisions (table 7).

Table 7. Career duration according to competitive level

	Competitive Level	N	Mean	Standard deviation
Career duration	1st division	43	16.4	2.3
	2nd division	41	14.0	3.3

There are statistically significant differences in career duration ($t(71)=3.874$; $p=0.001$) between these groups with an average difference of 2.5 years in the sample (IC95% 1.2; 3.7 years), consequently, there is a trend for players who play mostly on secondary levels to have a shorter average career duration than those who play primarily in the main division. Effect size was considered large Cohen's $d = 0.846$ (IC95% 0.396; 1.290 years).

The analysis of career duration in relation to international status reveals that of the 84 former players in the sample, 26.2% were international "AA" players for the Portuguese football team. When compared to non-internationals (73.8%), the average career duration is more than two years (table 8).

Table 8. Career duration according to international status

	Internacional Status	N	Mean	Standard deviation
Career duration	No International	62	14.7	3.1
	International	22	16.8	2.5

Comparison between these groups show significative differences between them ($t(82)=-2.806$; $p=0.006$). This confirms, that non-international players have, in average, 2.1 years shorter career durations than international players (IC95% -0.6; -3.6 years). However, effect size was considered small Cohen's $d = -0.696$ (IC95% -1.192; -0.196 years).

Academic and technical formation during the career

The second facet of this study examined the qualifications acquired by former athletes throughout their careers, specifically in academic and technical domains. At the commencement of their professional careers, 40 former players possessed secondary education (47.6%), while 44 had third-cycle education or below (52.4%).

Academic formation during the career

More than a 60% of the former players did not pursue any academic formation (table 9).

Table 9. Academic formation during the career

		N	Percentage
Academic Formation	No formation	53	63.1
	Third cycle or lower	2	2.4
	High school	10	11.9
	University education	19	22.6
	Total	84	100.0

Analyzing academic formation during the career and the career end period reveals that more recent players (2006-2018) invested more in their qualifications (table 10).

Table 10. Academic formation according to career end period

			Career End Period		Total
			1988-2005	2006-2018	
Academic formation during the career	No	Count	25	28	53
		Adjusted Residual	1.9	-1.9	
	Yes	Count	8	23	31
		Adjusted Residual	-1.9	1.9	
	Total		33	51	84

Pearson's Chi-Square correlation coefficient shows non-statistically significant relationships ($\chi^2(1)=3.743$; $p=0.053$). Although the results are not significant, they are close to significance, which means that they should be interpreted carefully. It seems that younger former players had a tendency to have a dual career.

The relationship between academic formation during the career and competitive level of former players reveals that those who played in secondary divisions had more academic formation (table 11).

Table 11. Academic formation during the career according to competitive level

			Competitive Level		Total
			1 st division	2 nd division	
Academic formation	No	Count	34	19	53
		Adjusted Residual	3.1	-3.1	
	Yes	Count	9	22	31
		Adjusted Residual	-3.1	3.1	
	Total		43	41	84

Pearson's Chi-Square correlation coefficient shows statistically significant relationships ($\chi^2(1)=9.655$; $p=0.002$). This indicating that former players with a highly competitive level tended to receive less academic formation during the career. This finding is also supported by the relationship between career duration and the international status variable because international players had less academic formation during the career (table 12).

Table 12. Academic formation according to international status

			International Status		Total
			No International	International	
Academic formation	No	Count	34	19	53
		Adjusted Residual	-2.6	2.6	

	yes	Count	28	3	31
		Adjusted Residual	2.6	-2.6	
		Total	62	22	84

Pearson's Chi-Square correlation coefficient shows statistically significant relationships ($\chi^2(1)=6.930$; $p=0.008$). So, non-international former players tended to invest more in their academic formation during the career than international players.

Technical formation during the career

Practically 62% of former players received technical formation during the career for football coaching courses, with a focus on UEFA C and UEFA B courses (table 13).

Table 13. Technical formation during the professional career

		N	Percentage
Technical formation	No formation	32	38.1
	Football Coaching Course – UEFA C	29	34.5
	Football Coaching Course – UEFA B	22	26.2
	Football Coaching Course – UEFA A	1	1.2
	Football Coaching Course – UEFA PRO	0	0.0
	Total	84	100.0

Former players who completed their careers between 2006 and 2018 had more technical formation while playing, similar to what happened in relation to academic formation (table 14). However, these does not constitute a trend as Pearson's Chi-Square correlation coefficient shows non-statistically significant relationships ($\chi^2(1)=0.069$; $p=0.793$) between these variables.

Table 14. Technical formation during the career according to career end period

			Career end period		Total
			1988-2005	2006-2018	
Technical formation	No	Count	12	20	32
		Adjusted Residual	-0.3	0.3	
	Yes	Count	21	31	52
		Adjusted Residual	0.3	-0.3	
	Total		33	51	84

The technical formation during the career was also analysed regarding the competitive level of the former players. This analysis reveals that players in second divisions had higher percentage of technical formation during the career (table 15). However, Pearson's Chi-Square correlation coefficient shows a non-statistically significant relationship ($\chi^2(1)=0.077$; $p=0.781$).

Table 15. Technical formation during the career according to competitive level

			Competitive level		Total
			1 st division	2 nd division	
Technical formation	No	Count	17	15	32
		Adjusted Residual	0.3	-0.3	
	Yes	Count	26	26	52
		Adjusted Residual	-0.3	0.3	
	Total		43	41	84

Non-international players attended more formation courses than international players (table 16). Once again, the Pearson's Chi-Square correlation coefficient shows non-statistically significant relationship ($\chi^2(1)=0.685$; $p=0.408$).

Table 16. Technical formation according to international status

			International Status		Total
			No International	International	
Technical formation	No	Count	22	10	32
		Adjusted Residual	-0.8	0.8	
	yes	Count	40	12	52
		Adjusted Residual	0.8	-0.8	
		Total	62	22	84

Family milistones and general professional indicators

To comprehend the complexities of former players' familial lives during their careers, familial milestones were considered, including marital status, divorce during the career, number of children, and familial support throughout the career (table 17).

Table 17. Family profile of former players during their professional career

		N	Percentage
Marital status	No marriage	8	9.5
	Marriage	70	83.3
	Union	6	7.1
	Total	84	100.0
Divorce in Career	No divorce	65	77.4
	Divorce	13	15.5
	Total	78	92.9
	Not applicable	6	7.1
	Total	84	100.0
Childrens	Without children	15	17.9
	1 Children	24	28.6
	2 children	43	51.2
	3 or more children	2	2.4
	Total	84	100.0
Family support during th career	No support	9	10.7
	Partial support	22	26.2
	Total support	53	63.1
	Total	84	100.0

Regarding overall general professional career indicators, it is noteworthy that the former players resided away from their homes for an average of 8.1 ± 5.5 years. The mean number of teams represented by former players throughout their careers was 6.6 ± 2.9 (table 18).

Table 18. Number of clubs represented by former players

		N	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Number of Clubs	1 club	2	2.4	2.4
	2 clubs	3	3.6	6.0
	3 clubs	5	6.0	11.9
	4 clubs	11	13.1	25.0
	5 clubs	11	13.1	38.1
	6 clubs	15	17.9	56.0
	7 clubs	8	9.5	65.5
	8 clubs	12	14.3	79.8
	9 clubs	3	3.6	83.3
	10 clubs	5	6.0	89.3
	12 clubs	7	8.3	97.6
	13 clubs	1	1.2	98.8
	15 clubs	1	1.2	100.0
	Total	84	100.0	

Former players reported that they received a very high or high salary during their careers, with 77.4% affirming this perspective from a financial standpoint. Simultaneously, addiction or dependencies during their careers is reported by 16.7% of former players. Only 20.2% of individuals received psychological support at any stage in their careers (table 19).

Table 19. General professional indicators during the career

		N	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Financial perspective	Low salary	1	1,2	1,2
	Medium salary	18	21,4	22,6
	High salary	43	51,2	73,8
	Very high salary	22	26,2	100,0
	Total	84	100,0	
Addiction or dependencies	Without addictions or dependencies	70	83,3	83,3
	Smoking	8	9,5	92,9
	Drugs	1	1,2	94,0
	Gambling addictions	1	1,2	95,2
	Others	4	4,8	100,0
	Total	84	100,0	100,0
Psychological support	With support	67	79,8	79,8
	Without support	17	20,2	100,0
	Total	84	100,0	

Discussion

Career preparation

Former players in the study had an average of 6.4 ± 2.2 years of federated sports training before beginning their professional careers at the age of 18.3 ± 1.4 . Compared to those who played in lower divisions (7.3 ± 2.1 years), players in the first division had fewer years of federated participation in youth football (5.5 ± 1.9 years). These differences demonstrate statistically significant variations that indicate higher competitive level players advance to the senior team at a younger age, resulting in fewer federated years of youth football. A comparable study found that younger generations of Portuguese former players have started their formation training earlier (Carapinha et al., 2018), a factor that may enhance the significance of preparation for entry into a professional football career, which typically begins at just over 8 years of age (Ford & Williams, 2012; Metelski, 2023). The findings of our study indicate a delayed initiation of federated practice, which warrants further investigation in future research to substantiate the discourse surrounding early specialization versus diversification within this specific context.

In terms of career preparation, to evaluate which training factors former players deemed most crucial for achieving professionalism, the psychological dimension (40.5%) and the technical-tactical dimension (39.3%) were most emphasized, surpassing the physical dimension, which some studies indicate is critical for attaining professionalism (le Gall et al., 2010; Sal de Rellán-Guerra et al., 2019; Saward et al., 2016). The former players assert that technical execution, motivation, and determination were essential factors for professionalization. This trend is substantiated by studies examining the psychological factors that impact the development of football talent (Gledhill et al., 2017; Orosz & Mezo, 2015). The results suggest that improving focus, addressing anxiety, elevating self-confidence, honing problem-solving skills, and enhancing social abilities can greatly enhance individual effectiveness in achieving football potential and open doors for career advancement. Nonetheless, it is essential to advocate for longitudinal studies to pinpoint the key variables influencing a player's professional career, especially considering the complexities involved in defining and integrating talent and professionalization, particularly within specific cultural contexts, as highlighted by various authors (Gledhill et al., 2017; Monsees, 2024; Monteiro et al., 2020).

Career duration

The average career duration was 15.2 ± 3.15 years, aligning with the findings of several authors (Curran, 2015; D'Angelo et al., 2017; Kegelaers et al., 2018; Lemez & Baker, 2015; van Ramele et al., 2017). However, research conducted on the same population revealed that the transition typically occurs at 35.5 ± 3.6 years, lasting around 17 years, indicating an extended career duration (Carapinha et al., 2018), which may eventually be explained by the different samples used in the studies, especially regarding the competitive level of former players used in the studies. In fact, and based on our results, career duration showed statistically significant differences between former players with different competitive levels and international status. This suggests that there is a strong propensity for high-level players to have longer careers, as previous players who primarily played in the first division had longer

careers than those in the second division. This may be the consequence of technical proficiency, as these players frequently align with clubs that appeal to older age groups. As players get older, they can improve their technical and tactical skills every year as a way to make up for the loss of physical ability that comes with getting older (Rey et al., 2022). For example, there are studies that found that the number and percentage of successful passes are significantly higher in older players (over 30 years old) compared to younger age groups (Sal de Rellán-Guerra et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2020), a factor that may reinforce the reason why the careers of top-level competitive players are longer.

No statistically significant differences were seen between career duration and the career end period. Former players who concluded their careers between 1988 and 2005 had a shorter average career duration (14.7 ± 2.7 years) than those who retired between 2006 and 2018 (15.6 ± 3.4 years). This contradicts the pattern indicated by a comparable study, which implies that younger generations experience longer average career durations (Carapinha et al., 2018).

Academic and Technical formation during the career

The data related to the study sample reveals that 36.9% attained academic qualifications, whilst 61.9% secured technical formation throughout their careers. The findings are markedly elevated compared to those in other studies (Carapinha et al., 2018; Curran, 2015), especially given that 22.6% of these former players attained a university education. It was also verified that the predominant educational attainment during their professions was secondary education, aligning with previous research (Carapinha et al., 2018; Rintaugu, 2011; van Ramele et al., 2017).

Significant relationships correlations were observed between academic qualifications and competitive level and international status. The findings indicate that former players, especially those involved in secondary divisions and non-international competitions, achieved the highest level of academic formation during their careers. Higher-level players appear to encounter significant obstacles in maintaining academic education during their careers. The difficulties in reconciling professional careers with academic pursuits are attributed to the obstacles of balancing rigorous training schedules, travel commitments, and the imperative of maintaining academic progress, as indicated by scientific studies (Breslin et al., 2019; Da Costa et al., 2021; Ramos et al., 2017).

A majority of former players have finished football training courses, specifically UEFA C (34.5%) and UEFA B (26.2%), accredited by local football associations. This suggests a temporary flexibility to pursue formation and an interest in preparing for coaching positions after their playing careers. However, no significant relationships were found between technical formation and career duration, competitive level or international status. Some authors suggest that players tend to ignore or postpone dealing with the end of their careers as long as possible (Gazzaroli et al., 2017; Rintaugu, 2011). Nevertheless, the findings of this study indicate that former athletes exhibit a degree of interest over educational attainment. In fact, investing in education, training, and learning exemplifies a proactive strategy for readiness in the future employment market (Ehnold et al., 2024).

The dual career development model is gaining prominence in contemporary sports. (Cartigny et al., 2021; Stambulova et al., 2021). The findings suggest that in football, particularly in the portuguese context, it is important to address this topic beyond research. Additionally, players might benefit from assistance in balancing their careers with academic or technical formation. Establishing objectives during a career can enhance an individual's sports identity (Monteiro et al., 2021), and incentives for pursuing multiple careers can improve the quality of post-career transitions (Chun et al., 2023; Silva et al., 2022).

Family milestones and general professional indicators during the career

A majority of former athletes married (81.3%) at an average age of 24.3 ± 2.7 years, and 82.2% became parents, with 51.2% having two or more children. In contrast to the average Portuguese male population, who generally marry at 33.4 years and have their first child at 25.8 years (National Statistical Institute - 2024), these disparities may be ascribed to the financial stability attained by players throughout their careers. In this study, 77.4% of former players reported high or very high earnings compared to the average portuguese salary (1443 euros at the time of the interview). However, a FIFA report (FIFPro, 2016) indicates that over half of professional football players earn less than 1000 euros per month (45%) and 41% experience salary delays throughout their careers. Additionally, 15.5% of

the players experienced divorce during their careers, a factor noted in the literature as a significant non-sport cause of poor performance (Barriopedro et al., 2019; Grove & Stoll, 1999; Roderick, 2012).

The inability to accompany their families for all professional obligations (47% of former players experienced a lack of family support for at least one year), early marriage, and frequent relocations (averaging 8.1 ± 5.5 years from their official residence) may exacerbate familial pressure and instability throughout their careers. A supportive family environment is crucial for athletes' productivity and positive responses (Côté, 1999; Uehara et al., 2022; Wylleman et al., 2004). The theory of family systems suggests that well-functioning families offer various benefits to individual members (Newhouse-Bailey et al., 2015), and sports, particularly football, are no exception.

The study also found significant mobility among former players, with an average residence time of 8.1 ± 5.5 years. Numerous authors emphasize that football operates as a global business, resulting in players moving across cities and countries, unlike the general population (Chapoulie, 1987; FIFPro, 2016; Mouw et al., 2024; Stambulova et al., 2021). The number of clubs represented by the former players in the sample of this study (6.6 ± 2.9 clubs) slightly reflects this tendency.

The utilization of stimulants and engagement in addictive behaviours are frequently associated with phases of elevated demand or adversity in athletes' careers (Kegelaers et al., 2018). The results indicate that a significant majority of former players (83.3%) experienced no addiction, loss, or reliance during their careers. Nonetheless, 16.7% recognized encountering these adverse events, underscoring the necessity for additional inquiry. Furthermore, 4.8% of former athletes chose not to reveal their reliance. Previous studies indicate that football players are vulnerable to various mental health issues, both sports-related (e.g., injuries, overtraining, stress) and non-sports-related factors (Barth et al., 2022; Kegelaers et al., 2018; Rice et al., 2016; Teques & Rosa, 2019). Despite this, only 20.2% of former players received psychological support at some point in their careers. Considering that psychological issues are more prevalent during periods of high competitiveness (Rice et al., 2016), this is an important area for future consideration.

Ultimately, it is essential to recognize certain limitations of this study. The sample size ($n=84$) is relatively small considering the studied population. Additionally, the convenience sampling method may not accurately represent the diverse experiences of former players. Those with difficult or traumatic experiences may be less likely to participate in such in-depth studies conducted through interviews. So, it's relevant develop longitudinal studies with larger and more diverse samples to validate these findings and provide more comprehensive information on the professional trajectories and post-career transitions of former football players.

Conclusions

This study found that former Portuguese football players had an average career length of 15.2 ± 2.1 years, starting their professional careers at a young age (18.3 ± 2.2 years) and represented 6.6 ± 2.9 clubs in their career. Those who competed at higher levels had longer careers, typically over two years more. Former players often had variable careers, with half representing clubs outside their official residence for an average of 8.1 ± 5.5 years. Financially, they believed their earnings were significantly higher than the average Portuguese professional income. In terms of academic formation during the career, newer former players (2005-2018), those at lower competitive levels (second divisions), and non-international players received the most formation. In technical formation, non-statistically significant relationships were found, although many former players pursued football coaching courses.

The majority of former players (81.3%) started families early, marrying at an average age of 24.3 ± 2.7 years and having children during their careers. About 15.5% of these marriages culminated in divorce, and family support during their careers was not always possible. As a key aspect of the research, it is highlighted that 16.7% of former players developed addictions during their career.

All these trends support that the career is lived in an intense, absorbing way and with possible personal and family life impacts that can make them particularly vulnerable to the effects of aging on their careers that can negatively affect the quality of life of players in post-career.



The findings contributed to understanding the sociodemographic characteristics of former portuguese football players' professional careers, identifying potential long-term factors to enhance their sport participation, living conditions, and athletic preparation. The results of the present study should not be generalized to the population. Replicating similar studies with larger and more representative samples is crucial to confirm these trends.

Practical implications

In terms of practical applications, we have identified seven areas of action that should be taken into account in order to mitigate potential negative impacts of the professional career, as determined by the results of the sociodemographic and professional approach to the professional careers of former Portuguese football players, namely:

- Early Career Start and Development: Training programs for young football players should focus on both technical-tactical skills and academic development to ensure a longer and more balanced career.
- Support Systems for Players: Clubs and sports organizations should implement comprehensive support systems, including family support and psychological services, to address the challenges of early family formation, relocations, and career transitions.
- Career Transition Programs: Establish robust career transition programs that offer academic and technical training, especially targeting players in lower divisions and non-internationals, to prepare them for life after football.
- Financial Management Education: Provide financial management education to help players manage their earnings and investments, considering the significant income disparity between football players and the average population.
- Marriage and Family Support: Develop initiatives to support players' families, reducing the strain caused by relocations and career demands, which can contribute to higher divorce rates.
- Longitudinal Studies: Encourage further research with larger and more diverse samples to validate these findings and provide more comprehensive insights into the career trajectories of football players.
- Policy Recommendations: Advocate for policies that support dual career paths, allowing players to balance their sporting careers with academic and professional development, ultimately enhancing their post-career opportunities and quality of life.

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